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# Clarity of Responsibility Beyond the Pocketbook: How Political Institutions Condition EU Issue Voting

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## **Abstract**

One of the most influential findings of the voting behavior literature of the past two decades was the realization that the clarity of the domestic institutional context influences the relationship between economic perceptions and incumbent vote. This article extends this “clarity of responsibility” argument beyond economics to another policy field—European integration. To what extent do national political institutions mediate the extent to which voters reward or punish government for their policies relating to the European Union (EU) or European integration, that is, EU issue voting? Using data from the 2004 European Election Study, the authors provide evidence that clarity of responsibility affects the strength of EU issue voting. Specifically, EU issue voting is accentuated when the domestic institutional environment provides clear lines of responsibility. This finding suggests that

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the “Europeanization” of national electoral politics depends in part on the domestic institutional context within each member state.

### **Keywords**

clarity of responsibility, elections, European integration, voting behavior, multilevel modeling

Much of the literature on voting behavior over the past two decades has centered on the interactive relationship between domestic institutional contexts and vote choice. In particular, scholars interested in the link between the economy and incumbent vote have demonstrated that economic judgments are more likely to have a bearing on how (and even whether) to vote when responsibility for government performance is clear (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Bengtsson, 2004; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Nadeau, Niemi, & Yoshinaka, 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels, 2004; Tillman, 2008; Whitten & Palmer, 1999). The basic argument is that institutional ambiguity camouflages responsibility for policy-making decisions and outcomes, hampering citizens’ ability to express their discontent by voting politicians out of office.

Clearly the economy is not the only policy area for which voters assign responsibility. Indeed, it stands to reason that the so-called “clarity of responsibility” hypothesis advanced by economic voting scholars should be broadly applicable. We apply these arguments to an alternative policy field, focusing in particular on how domestic political institutions influence to what extent voters reward or punish government for their policies relating to the European Union (EU) or European integration. Specifically, we ask whether the simplicity of the lines of accountability in a given political context moderates the extent to which vote choices are affected by citizens’ evaluations by the European integration policies pursued by their governments, a process termed EU issue voting (de Vries, 2007).

Policy making regarding the EU or European integration provides a useful backdrop for studying this relationship between clarity of responsibility and voting behavior. Similar to the economy, European integration is today an inescapable issue for governments of all political stripes. The extension of EU competencies from market integration into noneconomic issues means that European integration in the post-Maastricht era can no longer be treated as simply a foreign policy issue. Quite the contrary, national governments actively shape the process of widening and deepening European integration through their activities in the Council of the European Union

and, as we assert below, are increasingly judged by citizens on their capabilities and decision making in this area (see de Vries, 2007, 2009; Evans, 1998; Gabel, 2000; Tillman, 2004). Moreover, European integration can have wide-ranging consequences for voters across economic, social, and cultural policy—making it important to voters and of interest to students of voting behavior.

In choosing to concentrate on European integration policy, we also benefit from rich cross-national data. The 2004 European Election Study (EES) administered comparable surveys in member states across the EU, so we are able to analyze EU issue voting in 19 Western and Eastern European countries. Importantly, the countries included in the survey also exhibit considerable variation in their institutional settings, which is key since we are interested in how the clarity of political environments influences voting behavior. Finally, and unlike most previous studies of clarity of responsibility, these data allow us to include respondents in a number of postcommunist member states (for an exception, see Roberts, 2008, 2009). This moves the analysis of clarity of responsibility beyond the advanced democracies, increasing our confidence in the applicability of this concept.

The results of our analysis lend credence to the clarity of responsibility argument, indicating that institutional clarity affects the strength of EU issue voting. This finding echoes those found in previous studies on the relationship between the economy and the vote. In environments where the lines of responsibility are clear, voters are better able to decipher which actors to reward or punish for European integration policies when they step into the ballot box. By contrast, in settings where the domestic institutional context blunts clarity, individuals are less likely to factor judgments regarding European integration policies into their vote choice since they are unable to apportion responsibility and consequently not sure whom to hold accountable.

The implications of our findings are important for voting scholars as well as those interested in EU studies. Since Powell and Whitten's influential work on clarity of responsibility in 1993, students of voting behavior have continuously sought to confirm and expand their initial theory and results (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Bengtsson, 2004; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Nadeau et al., 2002; Samuels, 2004). By and large, however, this research has remained in the field of economic voting (Giger, *in press*, and Tavits, 2007, being the exceptions). The results presented here demonstrate the portability of the clarity of responsibility hypothesis beyond the realm of economic policies.

This article also contributes to the literature on European integration. In focusing on EU issue voting, it speaks directly to the debate on the implications of EU policy making and the actions of national government actors at

this level of government for domestic politics and particularly to questions regarding the Europeanization of party and electoral politics (e.g., Börzel & Risse, 2003, 2007). Moreover, our article is relevant to the ongoing academic discussion on the democratic deficit in the EU (e.g., Coultrap, 1999; Føllesdal & Hix, 2006; Katz, 2000; Moravcsik, 2002; Zweifel, 2002). Do national elections provide an effective indirect mechanism helping “to ensure that EU policy-making [and the actions of national government officials] is, in nearly all cases,” as Moravcsik (2002) claims, “clean, transparent, effective and politically responsive to the demands of European citizens” (p. 605)? The evidence presented in this study yields only a qualified yes to this question. Though we find support for EU issue voting, suggesting that European citizens are able to use national elections to express their satisfaction or concerns regarding their government’s European integration policies, we also find that this “electoral connection” (Carrubba, 2001) is conditioned by the national institutional context. Indeed, we illustrate that although voters’ ability to express approval or dissatisfaction with European integration policies pursued by their governments can be effective when the lines of responsibility are clear, an opaque institutional setting that is characterized by competing political actors and multiple loci of control obscures responsibility, with potentially detrimental effects for democratic accountability.

The article proceeds as follows. We begin with the clarity of responsibility hypothesis and apply this argument to EU issue voting. The following sections describe the data, analysis, results, and robustness checks. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our findings and a discussion of the implications of this study for future research.

## **Clarity of Responsibility and EU Issue Voting**

There is an expansive body of literature on the extent to which differing political–institutional contexts influence citizens’ voting behavior. In particular, political scientists working in the field of economic voting have sought to explain cross-national differences in the relationship between the economy and government support by arguing that clarity of responsibility conditions this relationship (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Bengtsson, 2004; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Nadeau et al., 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels, 2004; Tillman, 2008; Whitten & Palmer, 1999). The basic contention is that domestic political systems that diffuse power among multiple actors (parties in particular) obscure the lines of responsibility, making it difficult for voters to evaluate and sanction the government in power for economic or policy decisions. The clearest application of this argument is in the area of economic

voting, where the vast majority of research has focused. Applied to the study of economic voting, the clarity of responsibility hypothesis suggests that the effect of national economic conditions on the vote is weaker in low-clarity systems. This hypothesis has found support in most studies (Anderson, 1995, 2000; Bengtsson, 2004; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Nadeau et al., 2002; Powell & Whitten, 1993; Samuels, 2004; Whitten & Palmer, 1999; but see Royed, Leyden, & Borrelli, 2000). Other recent studies have expanded on these findings to demonstrate that clarity of responsibility affects voter participation (Taylor, 2000; Tillman, 2008) and that vertical clarity of responsibility (understood in terms of a federal-unitary dimension) also moderates economic voting (Anderson, 2006).

Moving beyond these studies, there is good reason to believe that the clarity of responsibility argument has further applications beyond economic voting. The notion of clarity of responsibility applies to government accountability and the degree to which institutions work to diminish or enhance actors' influence over policy making, broadly defined. In a recent article, Tavits (2007) demonstrates that institutional clarity affects the prevalence of corruption across different societies, with low-clarity settings facilitating higher levels of corruption. In this article, we expand the clarity of responsibility argument to consider its effect on voting on a noneconomic issue, European integration policy. We are interested in the extent to which citizens use their vote in national elections to hold their governments accountable for their actions taken regarding the EU and, more importantly, how this relationship is affected by the clarity of the formal institutional setting.

The basic clarity of responsibility argument as applied to EU issue voting is that citizens' ability to assign responsibility for a nation's policies regarding European integration and to express approval or disapproval by voting them out of office is filtered by the domestic political environment (Anderson, 2000, p. 153). The assumption is that vote choice is at least in part a product of citizens' evaluation of a government's European integration policies. Voters prefer governments that pursue European integration policies that align with their own preferences and are apt to punish governments with opposing actions by voting incumbent parties out of office. But accountability for policy making is seldom transparent. As Anderson (2000) notes, "Responsibility frequently is shared by competing political actors through mechanisms such as coalition government or simply obscured because of multiple levels of decision-making and political control" (p. 153; also see Anderson, 1995). Citizens are able to assign credit or blame for a government's European integration policies only to the extent that they are able to discern who is in fact responsible (Anderson, 2000; Powell, 2000).

We argue that voters in high-clarity systems are more likely to punish governments for European integration policy that they view is not in the interests of citizens or of the country that the government officials represent. Implicit in our argument is the notion that national government officials are the dominant force in crafting and influencing EU policy making. Although EU legislative authority operates on both supranational and intergovernmental platforms through the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union and many decisions are made under codecision requiring consent of both institutions, the Council of the European Union is the principal decision-making institution of the EU. The council is made up of national government ministers from each member state and initiates new EU legislation in main areas of EU policy making ranging from foreign policy and economic and fiscal policy to competition and energy policy. Thus, the council often initiates laws that will replace existing national law. With the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty at the end of 2009, most council decisions are made by qualified majority voting, with some key decisions such as accession to the EU still requiring a unanimous vote (Cini, 2007; Jørgensen, Pollack, & Rosamond, 2006). In addition, we also assume that voters' support or opposition for an incumbent government party is at least partially a product of citizens' evaluation of a government's European integration policies and that the EU issue is important to at least some voters. A growing body of work that explores the impact of European attitudes on voters' choices in national elections provides evidence that it does play an important role in some countries at certain elections (see, e.g., de Vries, 2007, 2009; Evans, 1998, 2002; Schoen, 2008; Tillman, 2004). For example, in his examination of Austria, Finland, and Sweden, Tillman (2004) finds evidence of EU issue voting at the time of accession, a period in which EU membership can be assumed to have been salient. Similarly, de Vries (2007) finds evidence of EU issue voting in Denmark and the United Kingdom, two countries characterized by high levels of issue salience and party conflict over Europe, yet fails to find such evidence in the Netherlands, where conflict and salience regarding European integration are much more limited.

Our expectation is that voters are more likely to reward or punish governments for their European integration policy in higher clarity systems where a single, unified party has primary control over policy making. In lower clarity settings in which power is dispersed among multiple parties or in which policy-making coalitions are continuously shifting, by contrast, voters will be less able to award or punish governments for their European integration policies (Powell, 2000, p. 11). The rationale for this is twofold. First, institutional structures that encourage power-sharing arrangements among multiple actors



blur partisan accountability for EU policies. Since there are numerous participants involved in formulating policy, it is difficult for citizens to apportion responsibility and, in turn, to hold a single party accountable for the government's policies. Consequently, the likelihood that individuals will base their voting decision on EU policy making is less in low-clarity environments. Second, it is often unclear in low-clarity systems whether a citizen's vote will actually induce a change in a government's European integration policy. Elections in multiparty systems can be far from decisive; instead of producing a clear winner, they tend to serve as the basis for coalition bargaining among a number of parties (Powell, 2000). Voters' ability to punish or reward government officials for their European integration policies is therefore incomplete, as it may be unclear which parties will participate in any newly elected government. Thus, as Tillman (2008) notes in discussing economic voting, individuals' capacity to factor an issue into their voting behavior is affected in two ways when there is a lack of clarity of responsibility: "Citizens may be unable to predict the ultimate outcome of the election (in the sense of knowing which parties will govern), and they may be unable to hold all policy makers accountable in an election" (p. 1295). Here we apply this logic to EU policy making.

A number of different institutional arrangements disperse power throughout a political system and thereby cloud responsibility. In this study, we focus on a subset of indicators identified by Powell and Whitten (1993) and later amended by others (Anderson, 2000; Bengtsson, 2004; Nadeau et al., 2002; Powell, 2000; Royed et al., 2000) as markers for clarity of responsibility: the electoral system, majority status of government, opposition influence on policy making, and party system concentration. We discuss each of these below.

First, the electoral rules of the game often serve to diffuse government responsibility and obscure clarity in a political system (Powell, 2000, pp. 26-27). Majoritarian and proportional systems envision rather different roles for elections in connecting the preferences of citizens to government policy. Within a majoritarian vision elections allow citizens to directly choose between alternative governments, whereas a proportional view "sees elections as choosing representatives who can bargain for their voters' interests in post-election policy making" (Powell, 2000, p. 26). Although both systems link votes to policy, this connection is much clearer within majoritarian systems compared to proportional systems. Consequently, pure majoritarian systems allow for high levels of clarity, whereas proportional systems exhibit low clarity. Mixed systems that combine elements of both ideal types fall within these extremes and can be characterized by middling levels of clarity.

A second feature central to determining clarity of responsibility is the majority status of government (Powell, 2000, p. 52). Clarity of responsibility is at its maximum when a single-party government is responsible for policy making, that is, when leaders of one party hold the chief offices of the executive and command enough seats in the legislature to initiate and make changes to policies at their discretion. True minority governments in which a party holds the prime ministership but lacks the seats to control the legislature occupy the other extreme of the spectrum. Here, the government party(ies) is completely dependent on other parties for its survival in office and for successful passage of its policies. Responsibility is blurred because "the party or parties . . . can always claim that their best efforts were blocked by other parties and that responsibility for policy failures must be shared by them" (Powell & Whitten, 1993, p. 401). At the same time, the parties outside of the executive are not readily identifiable as policy makers, making it difficult for voters to hold them accountable (Powell, 2000, p. 52). The myriad of coalition types falling between these extremes exhibit intermediate degrees of clarity.

Third, the extent to which opposition parties are able to influence policy making can further obscure clarity of responsibility. Strong committee systems that provide opposition parties with "both real and symbolic bases of power" (Powell & Whitten, 1993, p. 400) in the legislature may be beneficial from the standpoint of representation of interests, but they cloud responsibility by facilitating (and sometimes even requiring) the dispersal of policy making influence to numerous groups, including opposition parties (Powell, 2000, p. 32). In such systems, Powell (2000) notes, "even the most attentive observers may be hard put to say which party should bear the major responsibility for the final shape of a particular piece of legislation" (p. 63).

The degree to which a party system is concentrated (or fragmented) provides a final indicator of clarity of responsibility. Two logics apply in this case. According to Anderson's (2000, p. 155) "available alternatives" argument, the ability of voters to hold a government accountable by throwing it out of office hinges on citizens being able to identify a credible alternative to the incumbent government. A large number of effective parties vying for power increases uncertainty about the likely form of any future alternative government. In such settings, there is a greater possibility that members of the existing government coalition may stay on as participants in the new coalition, hindering voters' efforts to sanction the responsible parties (Anderson, 2000, pp. 155-156; also see Lewis-Beck, 1986, pp. 340-341, 1988). Kernell (1997) offers a slightly different argument, suggesting that a large number of opposition parties leads

to a coordination problem for the voter; in essence, there are too many options from which to choose (also see Nadeau et al., 2002, pp. 410-411).

## Data and Operationalization

To examine the influence of clarity of responsibility on EU issue voting, we employ mass survey data from the 2004 EES. Our choice to rely on the EES instead of national election surveys stems from the breadth (cross-nationally) of the EES and the nature of the questions included. Unlike many national election surveys, the EES contains questions probing voters' evaluations of European integration policies.<sup>1</sup> This information is paramount, as it allows us to determine the extent to which voters' preferences for EU policy making influence their vote choice, that is, the extent of EU issue voting. Moreover, since the EES administers comparable surveys in member states across the EU, we are able to analyze how political-institutional arrangements influence EU issue voting in 19 Western and Eastern European countries.<sup>2</sup>

The dependent variable in our analysis, *incumbent vote*, is an individual's vote for an incumbent government party during the last national election. It is constructed using the following EES question: "Which party did you vote for during the last general election of [year]?" Based on respondents' party vote choice, we create a dummy variable, with 1 denoting a vote for a party in government and 0 denoting a vote for any other party. Since this question is based on respondents recalling their previous vote choice, we cross-validated the results presented in the next section using a dummy variable for incumbent vote based on the EES vote intention question: "If there were a general election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?" Again we use respondents' party vote choice to create a dummy variable, with 1 denoting a vote for a party in government and 0 denoting all others. Both conceptualizations of incumbent vote yield similar results.

We are interested in whether individuals who support their government's EU policy making are more likely to give their support to an incumbent party and, more importantly, whether this relationship is influenced by the clarity of governmental responsibility. We capture the extent of EU issue voting by creating an index of two EES questions. The first question asks respondents how much confidence they have that EU decision making is in the interest of their country, whereas the second inquires whether respondents feel EU decision making is in the interest of people like themselves. In both cases four answer categories were provided: 1 (*a great deal of confidence*), 2 (*a fair amount*), 3 (*not very much*), and 4 (*no confidence at all*). From these two items

we constructed an index, *benefit EU policy*. We recoded the index so that 1 signifies *no confidence at all* and 4 *a great deal of confidence*.<sup>3</sup> We expect that as respondents have greater confidence that EU policy making is in the own interest or in the interest of their country, their likelihood of voting for an incumbent government party should increase. Thus, if EU issue voting is present, the value of the benefit EU policy variable should be positive and significant.

*Clarity of responsibility* is measured by constructing an index incorporating the four indicators discussed in the previous section—electoral system, majority status of government, opposition influence, and party system concentration. These measures closely mirror those employed in previous voting behavior studies. First, our operationalization of *electoral system* stems from Powell's (2000, p. 41) three-category scheme, whereby systems are classified as predominately proportional, mixed, or predominately majoritarian. We assign these groups numerical scores reflecting the varying degree of clarity associated with each: *predominately proportional* = 0, *mixed* = 1, and *predominately majoritarian* = 2. Our second indicator—*majority status of government*—follows Tavits's (2007) application of Powell (2000, pp. 56-57). The coding reflects ascending degrees of clarity, with minority governments receiving a score of 30, coalition governments a score of 60, and majority governments a score of 100. Third, we operationalize *opposition influence* on policy making by considering the strength and inclusiveness of the formal committee structure in a given country. The number of permanent committees, proportional sharing of committee chairs between the government and opposition, and committee specialization corresponding to government departments provide powerful indicators of the potential influence of committees relative to the government as well as the influence of the opposition in the committee system. Taken together, these indicators capture the extent of opposition influence and thus reflect the diffusion of responsibility in a political system (Powell, 2000, pp. 31-36, 63-64; also see Strøm, 1990, p. 71). Combining them, we construct a trichotomous variable to operationalize opposition influence, where 0 = *high influence*, 1 = *some influence*, and 2 = *low influence* (Powell, 2000, p. 59). Finally, we take up Anderson's (2000) argument concerning clarity of alternatives by including an indicator of party system concentration (also see Kernell, 1997). Here, we rely on Golder's (2005) coding of effective number of parliamentary parties.<sup>4</sup>

We obtain a single country-level measure of clarity of responsibility by aggregating the above variables into a four-component index. We do so by first standardizing the indicators and then creating an index.<sup>5</sup> The outcome is a variable ranging from -1.08 (*low clarity*) to 1.33 (*high clarity*). The

breakdown of countries that we attain is roughly the same as those found in other studies on clarity of responsibility (e.g., Nadeau et al., 2002, p. 412; Powell & Whitten, 1993, p. 406). In general, three groups emerge: low clarity = Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia; middle clarity = Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Slovenia; high clarity = Great Britain, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain. Since we are primarily interested in the role that clarity of responsibility plays in moderating EU issue voting, we use this index to create an interaction term—*benefit EU policy*  $\times$  *clarity of responsibility*.

To determine if EU issue voting occurs independently of other sources of voting behavior, we control for non-EU-related policy and performance factors as well as for the socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents. The policy and performance variables include left–right proximity, government approval, and prospective and retrospective national economic evaluations. The socioeconomic controls include education, age, and social class. These latter variables are incorporated to control for dominant models explaining vote choice, such as economic and cleavage-based voting. In addition, the inclusion of these controls ensures that a respondent's attitude toward EU policy making is not merely a proxy for other factors. Much of the research on EU support points to socioeconomic attributes to explain support or opposition to EU institutions, policy making, and the process of European integration. The argument is that economic integration in Europe has created differential benefits for EU citizens (Gabel, 1998) depending on their income and education levels as well as on the basis of their social class status.

## Analysis and Results

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two parts. We first estimate a model of voting behavior using the complete index of clarity of responsibility. We then disaggregate the measure to examine the independent effects of its constituent parts—electoral system, majority status of the government, opposition influence, and concentration of the party system. The dependent variable throughout the study is dichotomous, with 1 indicating a vote for an incumbent government party and 0 indicating a vote for an opposition party. We cannot simply pool these national surveys given the fact that individual vote choices are also nested within a national context. Neglecting the hierarchical structure of the data would lead to an underestimation of standard errors and enhance the likelihood of spurious inferences. We estimate a multilevel (or hierarchical) model (MLM) that allows us to correct for dependence of

observations within countries (i.e., intraclass correlation) and make adjustments to both within and between parameter estimates for the clustered nature of the data (Snijders & Bosker, 1999; Steenbergen & Jones, 2002). This model also allows us to model differences in explanations of incumbent vote across national contexts, that is, the variation in EU issue voting across institutional environments providing different lines of responsibility for government policy. Since our dependent variable is dichotomous in nature, we estimate a MLM model with a logit link function and a Bernoulli sampling model (see Hobolt, Spoon, & Tilley, 2009, for a similar approach).

The MLM model can be expressed as a single equation for each level. We begin by specifying the Level 1 (or individual-level) model. The dependent variable ( $\pi_{ij}$ ) denotes the vote for an incumbent government party (1) or a vote for the opposition (0) for each respondent ( $i$ ) in each country ( $j$ ). In addition to the 11 individual-level predictors, the model includes an individual-level constant  $\beta_0$ , which enables us to bring in the Level 2 (country-level) predictors.

$$\text{Logit}(\pi_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \dots + \beta_n X_{nij} + \mu_{0j} \quad (1)$$

In addition, Equation 1 includes a term ( $\mu_{0j}$ ) that captures the variance in the dependent variable over the context. The inclusion of this Level 2 random effect (i.e.,  $\mu_{0j}$ ) allows us to test the effect of our country-level predictors without imposing the difficult assumption that our model accounts for all possible sources of contextual heterogeneity. Since the individual-level residual variance follows directly from the success probability of incumbent vote, this model specification does not include a separate parameter for the Level 1 variance.

We are interested not only in the individual-level explanations of incumbent vote but in particular in the way in which political institutions, that is in the lines of political responsibility they provide, moderate voters' choices. Specifically, our expectation is that voters are better able to reward or punish governments' for their European integration policy in higher clarity systems in which a single, unified party has primary control over policy making, whereas low-clarity settings leave voters less able to hold their governments accountable. Consequently, we include the clarity of responsibility index incorporating the four indicators discussed in the previous section—electoral system, majority status of government, opposition influence, and party system concentration (in a subsequent analysis—see Table 2—we include each of the clarity of responsibility components separately). Given the limited number of countries included in the analysis, we have to condense the inclusion of country-level controls. To account for the fact that the six Eastern European

countries in our sample have less developed political systems because of the transition from communist rule in the early 1990s, we include a dummy variable for *newly established democracy*.

For each Level 2 case, in the analysis a country, we estimate a unique Level 1 model. This produces intercept and slope estimates specific to each country. At the second level, each of the Level 1 coefficients (and their intercepts) is a potential dependent variable (see Raudenbush & Bryk, 1992). Equation 2 thus expands our model of vote choice for an incumbent government party ( $\pi_{ij}$ ) to also include both individual-level factors, that is,  $X$  and their estimates  $\beta$ , respectively, as well as two factors signifying the context in which a respondent ( $i$ ) resides, namely  $W$  and their estimates  $\alpha$ :

$$\text{Logit}(\pi_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \dots + \beta_n X_{nij} + \alpha_1 W_{1j} + \dots + \alpha_n W_{nj} + \mu_{0j} \quad (2)$$

The third equation signifying the final model also includes the cross-level interaction between voters' evaluation of EU policy making and the degree of clarity of responsibility, that is, benefit EU policy  $\times$  clarity of responsibility. It assumes that the strength of voters' evaluation of EU policy making on incumbent vote differs according to the degree of clarity of responsibility. The variance in the slope of benefit EU policy is thus partially accounted for by the contextual-level factor, that is, clarity of responsibility. Technically, this cross-level interaction is captured by adding the term  $W_{kj} X_{kij}$  and its estimate  $\gamma_{kj}$  as well as the random part  $\mu_{1f} X_{kij}$ . Incumbent vote ( $\pi_{ij}$ ) is modeled as a function of individual-level, country-level explanatory variables, a cross-level interaction, and a country-level disturbance term.

$$\text{Logit}(\pi_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1ij} + \dots + \beta_n X_{nij} + \alpha_1 W_{1j} + \dots + \alpha_n W_{nj} + \gamma_1 W_{kj} X_{kij} + \mu_{0j} + \mu_{1f} X_{kij} \quad (3)$$

Table 1 provides the results of the MLM logistical regression analysis incorporating the clarity of responsibility index.<sup>6</sup> Turning to the individual predictors included in the full clarity of responsibility model, we find corroboration of our theoretical predictions. It is important to recall that the coefficients in the model show the change in the log odds of voting for the government party(ies) versus the opposition as a result of a one-unit increase in the independent variable. In other words, a positive coefficient indicates an increased likelihood of voting for an incumbent party rather than an opposition party (Agresti, 2002; Long & Freese, 2006).

By itself, the effect of voters' evaluation of EU policy making on incumbent vote is significant and in the expected positive direction. These findings

**Table 1.** Exploring the Interaction Between EU Issue Voting and Clarity of Responsibility

Predictor	Baseline model		Clarity of responsibility model	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
Individual level				
Benefit EU policy	0.15***	(0.04)	0.13***	(0.04)
Left–right proximity	0.62***	(0.04)	0.62***	(0.04)
Government policy approval	1.32***	(0.05)	1.33***	(0.05)
Prospective economic evaluations	0.21***	(0.03)	0.21***	(0.03)
Retrospective economic evaluations	0.10***	(0.03)	0.11***	(0.03)
Gender	0.04	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)
Education	–0.01*	(0.01)	–0.01*	(0.01)
Income	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Social class	0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Religiosity	0.05**	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)
Residency	–0.02	(0.03)	–0.02	(0.03)
Country level				
Clarity of responsibility	—		–0.56*	(0.34)
Benefit of EU policy × clarity of responsibility	—		0.11***	(0.05)
Newly established democracy	—		0.11	(0.43)
Intercept	–2.50***	(0.26)	–2.39***	(0.24)
Random effects				
Contextual variance component	0.86***	(0.27)	0.58***	(0.19)
No. of groups	19		19	
No. of individuals	11,688		11,688	

Source: European Election Study 2004. Table entries are multilevel model logistic coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p \leq .01$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p \leq .05$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ , two-tailed.

fit our expectations regarding EU issue voting, demonstrating that the likelihood of an individual voting for the government increases as she or he has greater confidence that the EU policy making pursued by her or his government is more in line with her or his own interests or those of her or his country. More importantly, when voters' evaluation of EU policy making is estimated in interaction with the clarity of responsibility index, we find that clearer responsibility enhances the effects of EU issue voting considerably as



**Table 2.** Exploring the Interaction Between EU Issue Voting and Different Components of Clarity of Responsibility

Predictor	Components of clarity of responsibility							
	Majority status		Electoral system		Committee influence		System concentration	
	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE	Coeff.	SE
<b>Individual level</b>								
Benefit EU policy	0.15***	(0.04)	0.15***	(0.04)	0.15***	(0.04)	0.15***	(0.04)
Left–right proximity	0.64***	(0.04)	0.65***	(0.04)	0.63***	(0.04)	0.62***	(0.04)
Government approval	1.34***	(0.05)	1.33***	(0.05)	1.34***	(0.05)	1.34***	(0.05)
Prospective economic evaluations	0.21***	(0.03)	0.22***	(0.03)	0.21***	(0.03)	0.21***	(0.03)
Retrospective economic evaluation	0.10***	(0.03)	0.10***	(0.03)	0.11***	(0.03)	0.11***	(0.03)
Gender	0.04	(0.05)	0.03	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)
Education	–0.01*	(0.01)	–0.01*	(0.01)	–0.01*	(0.01)	–0.01*	(0.01)
Income	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Social class	0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Religiosity	0.05**	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)	0.05**	(0.02)
Residency	–0.02	(0.03)	–0.02	(0.03)	–0.02	(0.03)	–0.02	(0.03)
<b>Country level</b>								
Clarity of responsibility	–0.09	(0.30)	–0.10	(0.20)	–0.25	(0.20)	–0.23	(0.28)
Benefit EU policy × clarity of responsibility	0.07*	(0.04)	0.16***	(0.03)	0.06*	(0.03)	0.01	(0.04)
Newly established democracy	0.33	(0.50)	0.34	(0.40)	0.29	(0.39)	0.34	(0.45)
Intercept	–2.31***	(0.25)	–2.37***	(0.23)	–2.34***	(0.23)	–2.25***	(0.25)
<b>Random effects</b>								
Variance component	0.82***	(0.26)	0.62***	(0.20)	0.62***	(0.20)	0.72***	(0.23)
No. of groups	19		19		19		19	
No. of individuals	11,688		11,688		11,688		11,688	

Source: European Election Study 2004. Table entries are multilevel model logistic coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p \leq .01$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p \leq .05$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p \leq .01$ , two-tailed.

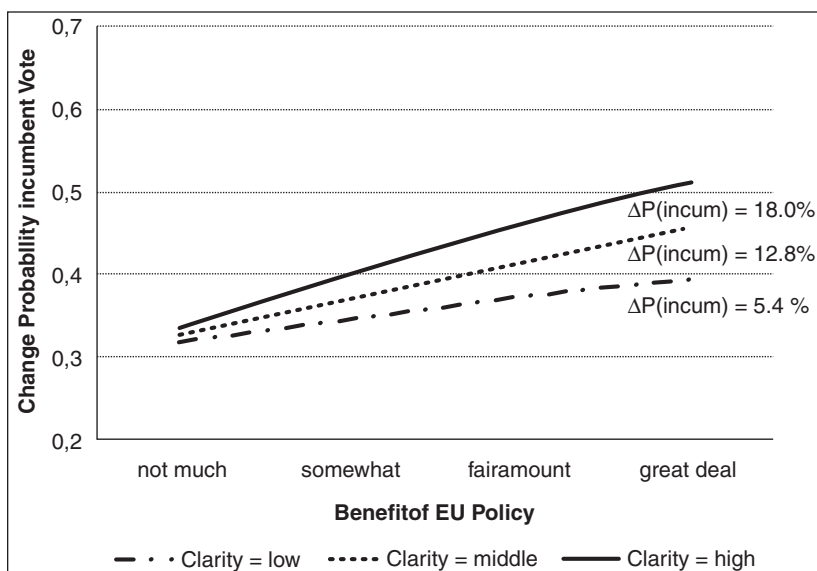
the coefficient is positive and significant. This effect is consistent with this article's hypothesis that clarity of responsibility facilitates voting on the EU issue.

We utilize a benefit EU policy index to operationalize the extent of EU issue voting. This index combines two items tapping into the degree of benefit of EU policy for "one's country" and for "people like yourselves." To ensure that the results are not dependent on the way in which the question is framed, we conducted analyses for the two items separately. These results show that the analyses based on the two components of benefit of EU policy are largely identical, that is, in both instances we find that clearer lines of responsibility boost the effects of EU issue voting. Consequently, we can be quite certain that the framing of the question in terms of national or personal benefit of EU policy making does not affect the overall result reported in Table 1.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the coefficients for the control variables conform to expectations based on previous research, suggesting that our findings regarding the EU issue are independent of traditional influences on the vote. The results demonstrate a strong influence of both left-right proximity and government approval on citizens' voting behavior. These results should not come as a surprise. Previous research suggests that the left-right dimension is the main predictor of vote choice. In addition, an individual will be more inclined to vote for the incumbent when she or he feels the government has performed well. It is also worth noting that we find support for the economic voting hypothesis. The likelihood of a citizen voting for the incumbent government increases as her or his evaluation (either retrospective or prospective) of the economy improves.

Because of the fact that our sample includes only 19 second-level units, the maximum likelihood estimation used in Table 1 may not perform optimally (see Gellman & Hill, 2007). Consequently, we also conducted an analysis using a Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method (see Gellman & Hill, 2007; Jackman, 2000) to inspect the robustness of our findings. The results of this robustness check show that the Bayesian setup yields substantially similar results to those reported in Table 1.<sup>8</sup>

The interpretation of logistic regression coefficients and interaction terms is not straightforward given that they convey changes in log odds and conditional effects. To express the results in a more intuitive fashion, we conduct postestimation simulations to gain a sense of the marginal effect of the interaction between EU issue proximity and clarity of responsibility on the predicted probability of incumbent vote (Brambor, Clark, & Golder, 2006). By manipulating the values of both voters' evaluations of EU policy making and clarity of responsibility (while keeping the others constant at their respective



**Figure 1.** Predicted changes in probability of incumbent vote as EU issue proximity and clarity of responsibility change

Note: Values indicate the predicted change in the probability of choosing a government versus an opposition party as a voter's evaluation of the benefit EU policy for her or his country and herself or himself changes. Low clarity = Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia; middle clarity = Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Slovenia; high clarity = Great Britain, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain.

means), we are able to observe changes in the predicted probabilities of choosing the incumbent government over the opposition. We are primarily interested in the moderating influence of clarity of responsibility on EU issue voting. Are individuals in higher clarity environments more likely to take their EU policy making evaluations into account when casting their votes than those in lower clarity settings? Figure 1 sheds light on this question.

The figure illustrates the impact of voters' evaluations of the benefit of EU policy making on the likelihood that an individual will vote for a government party, taking into account different institutional contexts. The x-axis denotes the voters' evaluations of the benefit of EU policy making for themselves or their country, whereas the y-axis shows the probability of voting for a government party at each value of benefit EU policy. The three lines show these marginal effects for high, middle, and low levels of clarity of responsibility. Recall that we obtained a single country-level measure of clarity of

responsibility by aggregating the above variables into a four-component index to produce three groups: low clarity (Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia), middle clarity (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Slovenia), and high clarity (Great Britain, Greece, Luxembourg, Portugal, and Spain). To illuminate the conditional effect of clarity of responsibility on the impact of EU policy-making evaluations on incumbent vote, we provide marginal effects for low-, middle-, and high-clarity countries separately. The predicted change in vote probability as benefit EU policy is moved from a minimum to maximum value under high-clarity conditions is 18 percentage points compared to only 5.4 percentage points when clarity is low. This conforms to our expectations. Political systems that concentrate power enhance the relationship between incumbent vote and EU policy making evaluations, generating higher levels of reward or punishment of governments on the basis of the European integration policies they pursue in high-clarity systems as compared to their low-clarity counterparts.

### **Robustness Check: Individual Components of Clarity of Responsibility**

What about the individual components of clarity of responsibility? Are the findings above driven by a specific variable included in the clarity index, or does each of the components have a direct impact on the strength of the EU issue voting relationship? We can further explore the influence of clarity of responsibility on EU issue voting by breaking down the index into its component parts and examining the individual effect of each on EU issue voting. To do so, we run separate models for the four indicators—electoral system, concentration, majority status of government, and committee influence.<sup>9</sup> The results are reported in Table 2.

The findings of the analyses attest to the robustness of our argument for all of the individual clarity of responsibility components except for system concentration measured by the effective number of parliamentary parties. In the case of system concentration, the sign of the interaction effect coefficient is in the expected positive direction but does not reach statistical significance. For the other components, the coefficients and the key interaction terms are statistically significant, demonstrating that higher levels of clarity of responsibility make it more likely that an individual will choose to vote for the government on the basis of her or his evaluations of EU policy making. This suggests that majoritarian electoral systems, majority governments, and weak opposition influence are all *individually* associated with higher levels of EU issue voting.

Overall, these results demonstrate that political institutions influence the level of EU issue voting via clarity of responsibility. Institutional environments that concentrate executive power, creating clear lines of responsibility, allow voters to sanction governments for the state of their policy making regarding European integration. This finding adds to the growing body of scientific work on EU issue voting by highlighting a factor that helps to explain cross-national variations in the extent of EU issue voting. Our results suggest that EU issue voting is most prominent in member states whose political systems concentrate executive power in the hands of a single national party. This possibility had been neglected in previous research on EU issue voting.

## Conclusion

This study examines whether EU issue voting is conditioned by political institutions. Drawing on strong evidence from the economic voting literature, this study argues that the extent to which a domestic institutional environment presents clear lines of accountability for government policy making affects the degree to which evaluations of one's government's EU policy making inform ballot choices. In other words, the link between European integration policies and incumbent vote is stronger when responsibility of government performance is clear. The empirical analysis presented in this study provides compelling evidence for the extension of the clarity of responsibility argument beyond the context of economic voting. Using 2004 EES data from 19 Eastern and Western European countries, we demonstrate the impact of the formal institutional setting on levels of EU issue voting. In particular, we show that in institutional settings that focus executive power, that is, in those where the lines of responsibility are clear, voters are better able to determine which actors to reward or punish for their European integration policies.

This study makes two important contributions. First, its findings are important for students of voting behavior. The clarity of responsibility hypothesis was developed in the early 1990s by scholars to explain cross-national variations in the strength of economic voting. To date, however, no other study has exported or tested the clarity of responsibility hypothesis in other fields of policy voting (the other two studies that apply this concept to another field—Giger, *in press*, and Tavits, 2007—examine the effect of clarity on corruption and the electoral costs of social policy, respectively). Consequently, the evidence presented here is significant in that it demonstrates the applicability of the clarity of responsibility argument beyond the ambit of economic policies.

Second, this research contributes to the field of EU studies in that it adds to our understanding of the conditions under which EU issue voting takes place. Interestingly, by demonstrating that EU issue voting is moderated by

political institutions in largely the same way as economic voting, this study suggests that the EU issue behaves more or less like any other policy issue in electoral competition. More importantly, the results add to our understanding of cross-national variation in levels of EU issue voting. Previous research has highlighted the role of strategic party behavior (de Vries, 2007) and referenda on EU questions (de Vries, 2009; Tillman, 2004) in generating a European issue in national elections. Our results suggest that the extent to which this EU issue becomes important in national elections is moderated by that country's political system.

We conclude by outlining several future avenues of research that this study has not considered. First, in a next step we intend to compare these results to issue voting in other areas, such as immigration or the environment. Is issue voting on these increasingly salient matters also conditioned by institutional characteristics? If a generalizable pattern emerges about the effects of clarity of responsibility on performance and issue voting, this would have important ramifications for our understanding about institutional design and policy representation (Powell, 2000). Second, this study has focused solely on horizontal clarity of responsibility at the national level. An additional line of research concerns an important and often omitted component of political context and clarity of responsibility: the vertical dimension of multilevel governance (see Anderson, 2006). Indeed, the development of the EU institutions itself may have obscured responsibility for government policy at the national level. Policy making in contemporary Europe takes place in a tangled web of institutional responsibilities, meaning that governments throughout the EU no longer hold a sole monopoly over policy making. As a result, it will be important to examine the extent to which these developments have resulted in the blurring of government responsibilities in the eyes of voters by a comparison of EU and non-EU member states.

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## Notes

1. Some readers may question whether our results hold given that the focus and timing of the European Election Study (EES) surveys may lead to overstated European Union (EU) issue voting. A number of previous studies using national election study data have found evidence of EU issue voting, so we would contend that this basic finding is not in doubt. Moreover, our focus is on differences in the strength of EU issue voting across member states. Since any presumed cueing effect in the EES surveys should be constant across national contexts, this should not be a threat to inference for our study.
2. The following countries are included in the analysis: Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.
3. This is a slightly different measure than previous studies of EU issue voting have used (e.g., de Vries, 2007; Schoen, 2008; Tillman, 2004). Prior studies have generally measured the distance between each respondent and party on a 10-point scale of support or opposition to European integration. We chose this measure because it captures voters' evaluations of their governments' performance concerning EU policy making. In doing so, we can determine the extent to which institutional clarity affects the way in which voters relate to the EU policy performance of their government to electoral support for incumbent. In this sense, it is not identical to the concept of EU issue voting developed by Tillman (2004) and de Vries (2007), but it focuses on the same underlying preferences regarding continued European integration. We also note that we ran the analyses using the issue proximity measure used in other studies (e.g., de Vries, 2007; Tillman, 2004), and we obtained the same substantive results presented here, adding strength to our contention that this measure relates to those used in other studies of EU issue voting.

4. Note that these four components largely coincide with the operationalization of clarity of responsibility found in the seminal work of Powell and Whitten (1993; also see Powell, 2000). Powell and Whitten outline five components of clarity of responsibility (pp. 397-402): opposition committee chair, weak party cohesion, politically significant bicameral opposition, minority government, and number of government parties. The index employed here already covers opposition committee influence, the number of parties, and the minority status of a government. To inspect the robustness of our findings further, we also conducted the analysis using an indicator of bicameral opposition based on Powell (2000) as an additional component of clarity of responsibility. The results of this analysis provide largely identical results to those presented here. We unfortunately lack current data on party cohesion and could not perform a robustness using this component.
5. The correlations (significant at the  $p < .001$  level, two-tailed) between the four different components of clarity of responsibility are .53 between committee influence (CI) and electoral system (ES), .18 between CI and majority status (MS), .14 between CI and system concentration (SC), .53 between ES and MS, .37 between ES and SC, and .51 between MS and SC.
6. All models were estimated in MIWin 2.12.
7. These results are available from the authors on request.
8. These results are available from the authors on request.
9. Since the indicators are intended to capture the same underlying concept of clarity, they are highly correlated. Including all of them in a single analysis would therefore not be particularly fruitful since the independent effects would likely be underestimated given the high degree of multicollinearity.

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